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Collin County officials push back against U.S. 75 toll plan



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By [BRANDON FORMBY](#)

Transportation Writer

bformby@dallasnews.com

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Part of the plans to create America's largest network of managed toll lanes hit organized opposition this week in a brewing battle over U.S. 75's controversial car pool lanes.

Seven state lawmakers and all five of Collin County's commissioners told the Texas Department of Transportation's executive director in a letter that they don't want the agency to turn the car pool lanes into tolled express lanes.

TxDOT wants to open the car pool lanes from LBJ Freeway in North Dallas to just south of McDermott Drive in Allen up to single-occupancy vehicles — if drivers are willing to pay tolls. Car poolers would still be able to use the lanes for free, if they have a TollTag and register their trip ahead of time. The highway's existing main lanes will remain free.

TxDOT officials say the point is to add an extra lane of capacity to ease some of the congestion on U.S. 75, a major north-south corridor between Dallas and its booming northern suburbs.

"What we're looking at is maximizing usage," said Tony Hartzel, a spokesman for TxDOT's Dallas district.

The lanes have been underused by car poolers. Many critics say that's largely because there is no entrance or exit from Dallas until central Plano. That rules them out for people trying to get in and out of south Plano or all of Richardson.

TxDOT estimates use of the lanes would quadruple if drivers willing to pay tolls could join car poolers. But the cadre of lawmakers and county officials who authored the letter says TxDOT should simply convert the lanes into more free main lanes.

"That would go a long way in reducing and relieving congestion," said state Rep. Jeff Leach, R-Plano, one of the officials who signed the letter.

Contentious history

The high-occupancy-vehicle lanes have been a source of controversy since their debut.

TxDOT spent almost the entire 1990s rebuilding U.S. 75, also known as Central Expressway, from Dallas to McKinney. But as Collin County's suburbs exploded in the 2000s, traffic continued to be a problem. In the mid-2000s, TxDOT turned the highway's inner shoulders into car pool lanes.

The initial plan was to create reversible car pool lanes, like the ones on Interstate 30 east of downtown Dallas. Drivers would be allowed to head south in the mornings and north in the evenings. But the northern suburbs' population growth also turned those cities into formidable employment hubs. With those jobs came more traffic from the south. Soon, traffic was bad in both directions during both morning and evening rush hours.

Instead, TxDOT used the inner shoulders to create permanent car pool lanes in each direction. That didn't leave enough room to create entrances to and exits from the lanes in Richardson.

“We weren’t able to widen anywhere,” Hartzel said.

Converting them to free lanes now, Hartzel said, isn’t as easy as it sounds.

Complications

Hartzel said the state had to get federal approval to turn the shoulders into driving lanes because TxDOT’s plan went against normal design practices. Hartzel said because the lanes were turned over to car poolers, the project was deemed to be one that could improve air quality, so it was approved.

Hartzel said opening the lane to everyone would probably require inside shoulders to be added back — which would require widening the road and reconfiguring several bridges, ramps and interchanges.

“It doesn’t sound like it’s an option,” he said.

Managed toll lanes have already opened on LBJ Freeway and the DFW Connector. The bridges between LBJ and Interstate 35E set to open this month are also managed toll lanes. Still more such lanes are key parts of planned expansions and renovations on I-35E through Denton County, Loop 12, Interstate 30 on both sides of downtown Dallas and State Highways 183 and 114. North Texas will have 100 miles of managed toll lanes by the end of 2019.

More workshops

Part of the opposition to converting the lanes on 75 is that officials say TxDOT hasn’t adequately told residents and leaders about the plan. A meeting in Richardson about the project drew opposition from many in attendance last month.

TxDOT and the Regional Transportation Council plan to hold more workshops about the project next month. Dates haven’t been set, but Leach said he’ll be there. He and other state and suburban leaders say their constituents are adamantly opposed to another toll project.

“I’m very concerned that this is being rammed through quickly and the people in Collin County are going to speak loud,” Leach said. “As their representative, I’m going to lead the charge in doing so.”

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